THE METRICAL GRAMMAR OF BEOWULF

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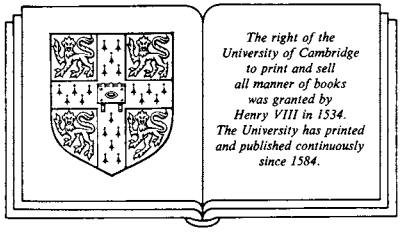

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The *Beowulf*-poet and his metrical grammar

Beowulf is a poem of infinite variety. If we cannot know precisely what it may have meant to its original, probably monastic, audience, it certainly speaks to modern audiences in many modes and moods. It has been called a heroic epic, a wondertale, an elegy for a bygone age, a mirror for princes, a celebration of pagan Germanic values, an allegory of Christian virtues, an exploration of the moral ambiguities of life and so on.

The style and structure of the poem are as rich and complex as the matter which they embody. So intertwined and mutually reinforcing are content, style and structure that J. R. R. Tolkien compared the shape of its narrative to the form of the alliterative long line,[1] and John Leyerle pointed out the resemblance of its structure to the intricate interlace designs of the Anglo-Saxon art of the seventh and eighth centuries.[2]

The *Beowulf*-poet was fascinated by the ways and means of oral composition. He incorporated several narratives of storytelling into his own narrative. Hrothgar builds the great hall Heorot, and his scop sings a song of creation, the substance of which the poet summarizes (90b–98). This recitation is part of the joyful noise of celebration which angers Grendel and incites his attack on the hall. When Beowulf arrives at Heorot, bringing an offer of help against Grendel, the Danes celebrate again, and the scop from time to time sings with his clear voice (496b–97a). Then, after Beowulf's victory over Grendel, the scop recites the story of Sigemund:[3]

Hwilum cyninges þegn,
guma gilphlæden, gidda gemyndig,

[1] 'Monsters and Critics', pp. 36–7. [2] 'Interlace Structure', p. 1.

[3] For important commentary on 874b–77 and its significance for understanding the organizing principle of *Beowulf*, see Creed, 'Singer as Architect', pp. 133–6.

se ðe ealfela ealdgesegena
worn gemunde, word oþer fand
soðe gebunden; secg eft ongan
sið Beowulfes snyttrum styrian,
ond on sped wrecan spel gerade,
wordum wrixlan; welhwylc gecwæð,
þæt he fram Sigemunde[s] secgan hyrde
ellendædum . . .[4]

Facility, memory, tradition, allusion, improvisation, alliteration, form and variation – these are apparently what the *Beowulf*-poet thought mattered in the art of Hrothgar's scop, and it is not difficult to conclude that they are what he valued in his own art.

Unfortunately, nothing is known about the *Beowulf*-poet himself beyond the fact that he was an Englishman[5] who lived sometime after the death of King Hygelac in the first half of the sixth century,[6] which he reports (esp. 2354b–79a), and before the penning of the unique manuscript of the poem at the very beginning of the eleventh century. All we have is his voice, speaking the poem. Still, each of us living with the poem over a period of time and pondering all that has been said about it is bound to flesh out the voice somehow and give this shadowy figure 'a local habitation and a name'. My impressions of the poet and his milieu help form the assumptions that underlie this study of his metrical grammar. It seems only fair to share them with the reader. Here then is an imaginary portrait of the artist.

The *Beowulf*-poet came from an aristocratic family and grew up at a royal court. He learned at an early age the rituals of courtly behaviour. He assimilated the ideals of the warrior class to which his family belonged. At

[4] 'From time to time the king's thegn, a man filled with heroic language, who remembered tales, a very great many old sagas, fashioned new phrases truly linked; he then began skilfully to narrate Beowulf's adventure, and fluently to recite, varying his phrases, a fitting tale; he told everything that he had heard said about Sigemund's courageous deeds . . .' References to *Beowulf* are to Klaeber's text, unless otherwise noted. Other Old English poems are cited according to the texts in ASPR. Translations are my own, unless otherwise noted.

[5] Even this 'fact' involves assumptions, namely that the poem is the work of a single author, that the language of the poem is a guide to the poet's native land, and that the poet was a man and not a woman.

[6] The identification of Hygelac with the *Chlochilaichus* mentioned by Gregory of Tours (*Historia Francorum* III.3) seems certain.

mealtimes and great feasts and during the long winter evenings he listened to the boasts of the young warriors, to the tales of the wise men who could remember what had been done in days of old in the lands from which his tribe had come and to the formal speeches of the king and queen whose power flowed as much from their control over their words as from the king's prowess in war and the queen's generosity. The retainers who could find the right words to tell what men had done in the past and what they should or would do in the future were highly honoured. The king's scop sat at the feet of the king.

The words that everyone admired most were recited or sung in the alliterating rhythmical cadences of the heroic lays and praise poems[7] which were the favourite entertainment of the court. On formal occasions the audience was mostly males of fighting age and their elders, along with a few of the higher ranking women in the court. But there were many opportunities for everyone who lived in the vicinity of the court, men, women and children, to hear the same fare. In the remoter villages and farms the entertainment was similar, but the formal standards of the storyellers were not so exacting and their subjects tended to be homelier. Everybody had a chance to participate: there were women's songs and cowherds' songs. The means of expression in the court and in the countryside were always the same – the alliterative metre which their ancestors had brought with them from the continent. Most people could recite, more or less from memory, and in uncertain approximation of the traditional alliterative measures, a short poem in praise of their family's ancestors or the like. A few acquired a reputation for the polish of their performance or for their ability to extemporize a poem in honour of the king or in commemoration of a battle. The very best of the singers from the warrior class were attached to the person of the king.

As a young boy, the *Beowulf*-poet listened to hundreds of recitations. Like the singers of tales whom Milman Parry and Albert Lord observed in Yugoslavia,[8] he absorbed the recurrent formulae of the scops and, with practice, learned to fashion similar expressions of his own. He found his voice and made it heard. His genius manifested itself in early adolescence; he was not a late bloomer, like Cædmon. His rank and his talent brought him to the king's attention. But for all his love of the martial spirit and

[7] On the importance of praise poems, or eulogies, see Opland, *Anglo-Saxon Oral Poetry*, esp. pp. 172–4.

[8] See Lord, *Singer of Tales*, esp. pp. 3–29.

exploits of his family and people, he had a deeply reflective and questioning nature. He entered a monastery, choosing to become God's thegn rather than the king's.

In the monastery, the *Beowulf*-poet learned to read and write Latin and English. He became acquainted with Vergil's *Aeneid* and Prudentius's *Psychomachia* and gained an appreciation of the possibilities of extended epic narrative. He knew by heart the 150 psalms of the Old Testament, but he could not erase the memory of the heroic lays of his countrymen. The brothers of the monastery were delighted to have a gifted singer in their midst.[9] With the abbot's permission he sometimes recited the exploits of their favourite heroes in the refectory at mealtime (the abbot was later to be severely criticized for this indulgence). What they loved was the way he could turn a story familiar to them from childhood into a meditation on the dilemmas of human conduct and the universal dependence of pagans and Christians on God. The abbot thought so highly of his talent and of the exemplary character of his poems that he encouraged him to write out some of them on the monastery's precious parchment. One of these was copied again sometime around AD 1000. This manuscript of *Beowulf*[10] is the only copy of the only one of his poems which has escaped the destruction of the centuries.

The truth about the *Beowulf*-poet may have been very different from the portrait I have painted. I had better say plainly that I do not really think it is likely that he was a monk under Bishop Higbald of Lindisfarne at the end of the eighth century.[11] Recent work has re-opened the possibility that the poem might after all be a product of the ninth or even tenth century.[12] But I should insist on the probability of certain features. That the *Beowulf*-poet was a supremely competent oral poet who had grown up in a community where oral composition was intensively practised seems to me certain. Virtually every half-line of the poem is 'formulaic' in the sense that its

[9] On the interest of Anglo-Saxon monks and priests in heroic saga, see the comments of Mayr-Harting, *The Coming of Christianity*, p. 223.

[10] London, British Library, Cotton Vitellius A. xv, 129r–198v.

[11] Higbald was the bishop of Lindisfarne who received the famous letter from Alcuin (MGH Epist. 4 (*Epistolae Karolini Aevi* II), 124) containing the admonition, which he doubtless passed on to the abbot: 'Let the Word of God be heard at the meals of the brethren. There it is proper to hear a reader, not a harper, the sermons of the Fathers, not the songs of the pagans. What has Ingeld to do with Christ? The house is narrow; it cannot hold both of them' (trans. D. W. Robertson, Jr).

[12] See the variety of opinions offered by the contributors to Chase, *Dating of Beowulf*.

cadence (the portion of the verse beginning with the first metrical lift) exhibits a common metrical–syntactical pattern with alliteration marking certain syllables according to precisely describable rules. A literate poet who had not previously acquired fluency in oral composition could probably imitate in a loose way the alliterative style of traditional Germanic verse, but the inner logic which governs virtually every syllable of *Beowulf* in accordance with regularities which become apparent only after an exhaustive study of the poem would be beyond his or her reach. And even if it were possible, what would be the point of such minute imitation?

That the poet composed *Beowulf* pen in hand seems to me nearly as certain.[13] The argument for written composition does not stem from the fact that the poem is long (though some scholars question whether there was a tradition of extended oral narrative in Anglo-Saxon England[14]) and of high quality. Parry and Lord's study of the living tradition of extended oral compositions in Yugoslavia conclusively demonstrates that oral literature can be both. But *Beowulf* has nothing in common with the narratives they describe.

For one thing, even though *Beowulf* is a poem about a hero who engages monsters and a dragon in mortal combat, it is extraordinarily lacking in action. The poet spends most of his time circling about a few moments of intense activity. He meditates, and his characters meditate, on the meaning of the events which occur or which have occurred or which are likely to occur. I do not want to claim that an oral poet could not conceivably create such a poem in an extemporaneous performance before an audience, but the likelihood of it seems remote. Nor is the likelihood much increased by supposing that the artificial circumstances in which a poem by an illiterate oral poet in Anglo-Saxon England would have been committed to parchment – namely, by dictation to a scribe – would have altered the conditions of the performance. A dictated oral poem might differ considerably in degree from a typical performance; it might be longer, or more carefully thought out, or less spontaneous, but there is no reason to believe that it would differ appreciably in kind. The assumption that the *Beowulf*-poet was a monk who knew how to read and write, and who, being an accomplished oral poet, could therefore dictate a poem to himself at a leisurely pace over a period of days or weeks, now rapidly

[13] For general arguments against the assumption that formulae in Old English poetry necessarily imply oral composition, see Benson, 'Literary Character', pp. 334–41.

[14] See esp., Campbell, 'Old English Epic Style', p. 13.

composing an extended 'run', now pausing to reflect on what he had written, or proceeding meditatively a line at a time, seems to me the one which best explains the kind of poem we have.

For another thing, even though the language of *Beowulf* is formulaic to the core, the style and structure of the poem seem thoroughly literary, much more so in my opinion than another major medieval poem which is also demonstrably formulaic and which has been described as the 'prototype of a transitional text',[15] the *Chanson de Roland*. There is in *Beowulf* more enjambment than might be expected in an oral poem. The poet frequently separates a subject from its verb with a parenthetical clause which may extend for two or three half-lines (e.g., 2237b–39 interrupted by 2238b–39a; 2258–60a interrupted by 2258b–59). Elliptical constructions require the reader to hold a controlling auxiliary in mind for several lines at a time (e.g., lines 1855–61). John Niles has convincingly argued that many of the major and minor structural patterns of *Beowulf* are the product of 'ring composition'. He acknowledges that the techniques of ring composition 'would be useful to an oral poet or performer', but he points out that 'oral texts taken from the field have not been shown to exhibit complex ring structures comparable to those evident in the *Iliad* and *Beowulf*'. 'Perhaps these structures exist', he goes on, 'but the necessary field work and analysis have not been done.'[16]

The art of *Beowulf* is more grammatical than rhetorical. Constantly shifting patterns of alliteration and metre enthral the ear of the audience and the eye of the reader. At first the patterns seem random, almost formless, until one realizes that they are predictably related to, and therefore a function of, the syntax of the verse clauses. But of course this is only a partial truth. Syntax is just as much a function of alliteration and metre as the other way around. The art of the poem must be sought in the delicate interplay between the differing constraints of alliteration, metre and syntax.

The *Beowulf*-poet gives a bravura performance in the art of alliteration in the opening lines of the poem:

> Hwæt, we Gar-Dena in geardagum,
> þeodcyninga þrym gefrunon,

[15] Curschmann, 'Oral Poetry', p. 47.

[16] *Beowulf*, pp. 152–62; quotations from p. 160.

hu ða æþelingas ellen fremedon!
Oft Scyld Scefing sceaþena þreatum,
monegum mægþum meodosetla ofteah,
egsode eorl[as], syððan ærest wearð
feasceaft funden; he þæs frofre gebad,
weox under wolcnum weorðmyndum þah,
oð þæt him æghwylc ymbsittendra
ofer hronrade hyran scolde,
gomban gyldan; þæt wæs god cyning![17]

The cross alliteration of the first line (G-D : G-D) is followed by alliteration linking the final lifts of lines 2 and 3 (F/F). Then a run of double alliteration marks the first half of six of the next eight lines. No two of the verses with double alliteration are just alike. The double alliteration of *Oft Scyld Scefing* (type C^1) is prompted by the use of a patronymic after a proper name. *Monegum mægþum* (type A1), with resolved stress in the first lift, has mandatory double alliteration in consequence of the insertion of the stressed proclitic adjective *monegum* before a stressed element. The primary alliteration in *egsode eorlas* (type A^3) is carried by the initial diphthong of the noun *eorlas*, supplemented by the extra-metrical alliteration of the verb *egsode*. The F alliteration in *feasceaft funden* (type A^{2a}) which builds to the consonant cluster FR in the second half of the line harks back to the final lifts of lines 2 and 3 (consonant cluster FR). Alliteration on *funden* is made obligatory by the fully stressed compound *feasceaft*, the second element of which picks up the thread of the SC alliteration that began with line 4 and concludes with the last lift of line 10. *Weox under wolcnum* (type A^3) is another verse with primary alliteration on the stressed syllable of a noun (*wolcnum*) and extra-metrical alliteration on a finite verb (*weox*). Single alliteration marks the first halves of lines 9 and 10 (although an interesting pattern of incidental vocalic and H alliteration may be noticed). In *gomban gyldan* (type A1), the poet returns to double alliteration and to the initial alliteration of the poem, which leads him to the exclamatory conclusion *þæt*

[17] 'Listen! We have heard of the glory of the Spear-Danes, of the people-kings, in days of yore, how the nobles performed deeds of courage. Often Scyld Scefing deprived of their mead-seats troops of enemies, many tribes, he terrified the earls, after he had been found destitute in the beginning; he experienced consolation for that, he grew beneath the skies, he prospered in honours, until each of the neighbouring tribes over the whale-road had to obey him, to give him tribute; that was a good king!'

wæs god cyning!. Since we know from the rules of the metrical grammar that the double alliteration which links *gyldan* to *gomban* is optional, the effect must be one which the poet intended. One of the reasons for undertaking an investigation of the poet's metrical grammar is to enable us to distinguish alliteration which is dictated *by* the rules of the grammar from alliteration which is chosen *according to* the rules of the grammar. Only then can we compare the formal elements of the poem with its content in a meaningful way.

The interpretation of data of this kind tends to be subjective. All Old English poetry is alliterative, and patterns of alliteration linking successive lines can be discovered in any passage of comparable length from any Old English poem. Most sensitive readers of Shakespeare's sonnets agree that their innumerable patterns of alliteration, assonance, consonance and rhyme are an essential part of the aesthetic experience and meaning of the poems. Of course, analysis of any paragraph in the morning's paper will turn up similar patterns to which no one will attach the slightest importance. In the end it comes down to the belief which most of us share that all the formal properties of a poem that moves us are somehow significant and find their echo at the level of the narrative.

These alliterations of the opening lines of *Beowulf* are the poet's way of showing his mastery of the form which will carry the story of Beowulf through the 3182 lines of the poem. The astonishing fact is that, without abandoning his alliterative form, he modulates in the final lines of the poem into what later generations would think of as rhyme. He tells how the Geats raise a monument for their dead leader – a great funeral mound on a headland. And then twelve noblemen's sons ride about the mound, lamenting their chief:

Þa ymbe hlæw riodan hildedeore,
æþelinga bearn, ealra twelfe,
woldon care cwiðan ond kyning mænan,
wordgyd *wrecan*, ond ymb wer *sprecan*;
eahtodan eorlscipe ond his ellenweorc
duguðum demdon, – swa hit gedefe bið,
þæt mon his winedryhten wordum herge,
ferhðum freoge, þonne he forð scile
of lichaman læded weorðan.
Swa begnornodon Geata leode
hlafordes hryre, heorðgeneatas;
cwædon þæt he wære wyruldcyninga

manna mild*ust* ond monðwær*ust*,
leodum liðo*st* ond lofgeorn*ost*.[18]

Only readers thoroughly familiar with the style of the poem will recognize how extraordinary this is. Isolated cases of terminal identity like 3171 and 3177 can be found elsewhere in the poem,[19] and occasionally internal rhyme within a half-line,[20] but nothing comparable to this accumulation of rhyme within the space of fourteen lines, including the full rhyme *wrecan/sprecan* and the quadruple repetition of the suffixes *-ust/-ost* in the last two lines which brings the poem to a full stop. From the perspective of the *Beowulf*-poet what we see as rhyme would probably have been considered the happy consequence of a final intensification or heightening of the appositive style, as Fred C. Robinson has so aptly called it,[21] that characterizes the poem. And still the alliterative form carries on in its endless variation. To notice only the three final lines: in 3180 there is transverse alliteration – C-W : W-C – which is made possible by incidental alliteration on the finite verb *cwædon*. And then the double alliterations in the first halves of the last two lines, alliterations which were not mandated by the rules of the poet's metrical grammar, but were optionally imposed,[22] draw the alliterative patterning to its stately close. Given the *Beowulf*-poet's attention to the form of his beginning and ending, it will not be superfluous to point out that the last lift of the last line is the first syllable of *-georn*ost with a return to the first alliteration (G) of the poem.

The poet's voice was modulated by his metrical grammar, the frame-

[18] 'Then the battle-brave men, the sons of the nobles, twelve in all, rode around the mound. They wished to bewail their sorrow and lament their king, to deliver a eulogy and speak of the man. They esteemed his nobility and praised highly his courageous deeds. It is fitting that one praise his friendly lord in this way with words, love him in one's heart, when he must be led forth from the body. So the people of the Geats, the hearth-companions, lamented the fall of their lord; they said that he was, of the kings of the world, the mildest of men and the gentlest, the kindest to his people and the most eager for praise.'

[19] Even in consecutive lines, e.g., 769–70.

[20] E.g., 279a, 656a, 1422a, 1611a and 1864a; 1008b.

[21] See his *Beowulf and the Appositive Style*. It may not be superfluous to point out that the widespread use of rhyme, especially internal leonine rhyme, in late medieval Latin poetry owed much to the encouragement by such scholars as Bede of the use of the rhetorical figures of homoeoteleuton (like-sounding endings in parallel constructions) and homoeoptoton (same case endings in parallel constructions).

[22] However, *manna mildust* (3181a) is a traditional formula: cf. *Exodus* 550a, and the Old High German 'Wessobrunn Prayer', 8a.

work of the poetic language he learned in becoming an oral poet. The metrical grammar of the *Beowulf*-poet is the complete set of syntactical, alliterative and metrical rules and conventions that go into forming the lines that make up the poem as we know it.[23] It might be supposed that the description of any metrical grammar would simply require the addition of the rules of alliteration and metre to the grammar of the poet's native language, and that a rigid metre would occasionally introduce distortions which would account for differences between everyday language and the language of his or her poetry. But this would be a misleading way to look at poetry which has its roots in an oral tradition. The language of poetry which Anglo-Saxon oral poets internalized during their years of apprenticeship in the poetic traditions of their culture contained grammatical, as well as metrical and alliterative, features which were specific to it.

The 'metre' of an Old English poem is only one function of a set of regularities that make it something we call verse rather than prose. Separately these regularities may be described as 'rules'; taken as a group, the rules comprise a metrical grammar. No two scops' metrical grammars would have been exactly alike; in addition to individual differences, there must have been regional and dialectal variations, although the poetic tradition ensured remarkable uniformity over a wide area and a considerable period of time, and only at the end of the Old English period, with let us say *The Battle of Maldon*, are significant changes manifest. Further investigation is needed to determine which rules of the metrical grammar of *Beowulf* can be generalized.[24] Daniel Donoghue has called attention to a number of specific ways in which the metrical grammar of *The Metres of Boethius* differs from that of *Beowulf*. He tentatively attributes this difference to the survival in them of the verse style of the early Germanic lays, which Campbell has described.[25]

Many of the rules of the Anglo-Saxon scop's metrical grammar corresponded nearly or exactly to the grammatical rules of his native language. A

[23] I have developed the notion of a 'metrical grammar' in part from the remarks of Lord on the grammar of poetry, in *Singer of Tales*, pp. 35–6. See further, Bliss, 'Auxiliary and Verbal', p. 157, Kellogg, 'South Germanic Oral Tradition', esp. p. 67 and Kendall, 'Prefix *un-*', pp. 39–41. It is important to point out that I intend 'metrical grammar' to refer to the rules of alliteration as well as those of syntax and metre.

[24] Orton, 'Verbal Apposition', p. 158, calls for investigation of this kind. See below, ch. 16.

[25] Donoghue, 'Word Order', pp. 190–2; Campbell, 'Old English Epic Style', pp. 13–26. Donoghue modifies his conclusions somewhat in *Style*, pp. 100–1.

few differed markedly. Some, and in particular those governing alliteration and stress, were unique. From these last we abstract our notions of metre as it is commonly understood. The scop internalized the rules of metre along with the other rules of his metrical grammar in the course of learning his craft. The chances are that he was never conscious of metre as a separate entity, especially if he had not received schooling in the metres of Latin. If we could return to the seventh century and Abbess Hild's monastery at Whitby for the purpose of quizzing Cædmon, we would probably find him as tongue-tied in the face of questions about his metre as he would certainly be about the way in which he constructed his sentences. Parry and Lord, working with illiterate singers of tales in Yugoslavia, discovered that they had no conception of so basic a notion as a line of poetry.[26] For this reason, it is unlikely that the typical unlettered scop ever consciously bent the rules of his metre for poetic effect. His poetic utterance was governed by the metrical grammar he had acquired. To speak poetically was to speak metrically, because metre was an integral part of that grammar. Of course he might mis-speak in rapid oral composition and thereby produce a metrically anomalous line. This is quite different from playing with the expectations set up by metre, as a modern poet might do.

Even the *Beowulf*-poet, who was almost certainly literate, depended on the resources of his metrical grammar rather than on self-consciously imposed deviations from it for special effects. Consider, for example, a line in which he put the alliterative stress on two demonstratives:

On þǽm dæge þýsses lifes (197)

Although this looks like a place where he chose to give rhetorical emphasis to normally unaccented words, it turns out that the the 'licence' was provided by a rule of his metrical grammar.[27] Line 197 is a formula in *Beowulf* (see 790 and 806) which belongs to the poetic tradition.[28] Similar 'violations' fall into fairly predictable categories, and all but a few can be accounted for within the rules of the metrical grammar.

The view, which has had some currency, that Old English metre was so

[26] Lord, *Singer of Tales*, p. 25.

[27] For the insertion rule which governs this usage, see ch. 5.

[28] For on *þæm dæge* with alliterative stress on *þæm*, see *Christ* 1096b and 1371b; for *þysses lifes* with alliterative stress on *þysses*, see *Genesis* 1120b, 1600b, 2452b, *Guthlac* 74b, *Phoenix* 151b, *The Gifts of Men* 19b and *Solomon and Saturn* 242b. Cf. the formulaic system . . . *þeos / þas woruld* with alliterative stress on *þeos / þas*, *Genesis* 1126b, *Christ* 1583b, *Guthlac* 125b, *The Phoenix* 501b, *The Wanderer* 58b and *Deor* 31b.

accommodating that it routinely permitted similar half-lines to be variously scanned to suit the exigencies of alliteration or the rhythmical whims of the poet is simply untenable.[29] By and large the scansion and alliteration of any given half-line of almost any Old English poem can be determined from its own grammatical properties without reference to the context in which it appears. I do not mean to suggest that scops could not vary their lines to suit their contextual purposes. The *Beowulf*-poet, at least, was enormously skilled at attaining variety in the shape and sound of his lines. But nearly all the flexibility he needed was available in the formal principles of his metrical grammar, which is the subject of the following chapters of this book.

[29] The view can be illustrated *passim* in Daunt, 'Old English Verse', and Baum, 'Meter of *Beowulf*'.